

DISTRACTED



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Mark 13: 24-37

Our scripture for today comes from a section of the gospel of Mark known as “the little apocalypse”. Once again, we find ourselves hearing scripture dealing with end times and Jesus doing his prophetic teaching.

A good point to remember when we are reading apocalyptic writings is not use these writings to predict specific events in the future but rather seek to understand God’s mighty acts in the past as a framework for understanding how we should respond to the present, knowing that God has and will remain faithful.

So we begin our journey into the season of Advent with a reminder to keep awake and not to get distracted even though there is so much to distract us like: a pandemic, a contested election, and a plethora of social situations that worry us.

Listen now to the word of God as it comes to us from:

Mark 13: 24-37

²⁴ “But in those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light,
²⁵ and the stars will be falling from heaven,
and the powers in the heavens will be shaken.

²⁶ Then they will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory. ²⁷ Then he will send out the angels, and gather

his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven.

²⁸ “From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. ²⁹ So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that Jesus is near, at the very gates.

³⁰ Truly I tell you; this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place. ³¹ Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

³² “But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. ³³ Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come. ³⁴ It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his servants in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to be on the watch.

³⁵ Therefore, keep awake—for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn, ³⁶ or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. ³⁷ And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.”

This is the word of God, thanks be to God.

I remember in my school years being given the warning at the beginning of a semester that there would be pop quizzes on occasion – and often these pop quizzes would count for enough percentage of your grade that they could make the difference between a A or a B or even a C. You never knew when the teacher would walk in the class and instruct you to put your books away and lay in front of you a quiz. I remember never feeling totally ready for the dreaded unannounced pop quiz. I like knowing when things are going to happen so that I can be prepared. I like to know what chapters of the book that the test will be over – so that I can study

those chapters thoroughly. I was the student asking, “what is the best way to prepare for the exam?” I wanted to be prepared. I still like being prepared. You don’t know how many times this pastor has dreams of being in the pulpit with no idea of what my sermon is. My husband says he has had these dreams too as a pastor – I guess we both carry that anxiety of being prepared.

It is the same with the disciples in Mark’s day. Jesus, in his longest discourse in the gospel of Mark, tells the disciples that the Son of Man will come again and so the disciples want to know when and how long? I would have been doing more than that – I would have been asking Jesus if literally the sun will darken, and if the stars will fall.

Brian Blount, wonderful historian and pastor, says that he believes that Mark’s gospel was written right around the time of the war between Israel and Rome (68-70 CE) when the destruction of the Temple happened, when many of the Jewish people were slaughtered by the thousands. I cannot imagine the level of anxiety for the gospel writer Mark or for these followers of Jesus during that time. As Mark recounts this saying of Jesus, the disciples had to believe that somehow these were the dark days, and I can imagine them watching for the sun to darken and the moon to not give its light. Rev. Blount said that he believes Jesus tells the disciples in symbolic language what is to come so that they will not be distracted by what they see around them.

I can envision the disciples frozen by that awful war, completely distracted and so caught up in the awful events that they forget that Jesus gave them a command, to keep awake!

They were to keep awake or be attentive to ways to witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ even amidst the struggle, to share God’s love to others and the good news that Jesus came to teach them about the

reign of God and the promise that Jesus made that he will return again.

Jesus knew that during such times of duress that the disciples would get distracted by the horrible events surrounding them and would likely feel compelled instead to do battle. Who wouldn't get distracted during a war?

Perhaps this year, more than other season of Advent we will hear these words of Jesus to keep awake very differently as we experience a season for us unlike no other. While we are not in a war and no one is destroying this house of God, we are in a season where we witness the plight of so many:

- suffering great loss during a time when it is impossible to gather for a normal funeral surrounded by family and friends,
- worried if there will be enough food and if eviction will happen from their home or apartment,
- hospitals overflowing and hospital staff pushed to the limit,
- with an inability to be with family for celebrations or to be with them when they are sick in the hospital,

and the list goes on.

Jesus knew that some people during times of duress would begin believing that this was the time that he would come again – but as we now know over 1950 years later from Mark's writing, the time of the war between Rome and Israel was not the time for Jesus to come, it was not the time during the world wars, it was not even the time when the year 2000 rolled around.

To which I believe Jesus would say – don't be fooled, don't get distracted by predictions, for if you do it will keep you from focusing on what God would have you to do which is to share God's love to

others, share the good news that Jesus came to give us life, teach about the reign of God and the promise that Jesus will return again someday. I believe Jesus would say that if you do get distracted it will keep you from being open to the nearness of God who is always as close to us as our breath and who stands at the gate of our hearts.

My question for this first Sunday of Advent is: This season, how are you hearing Jesus' command to keep awake? What do you or I need to be awakened to? Are we open to the season of Advent which as I told you earlier is a time that we open ourselves to God in Jesus Christ anew and allow God to do a new thing in our hearts and in our church for 2021?

Let us pray,

Holy God of Advent, the One True God who came to be with us incarnate in Jesus Christ, the Emmanuel who not only came at a specific time in history but who continues to come to us and abide with us, we give you our praise. Lord God, you know, that there are those who would be tempted to make predictions about Jesus' promise to come again; you know, that there is so much fear, anxiety, grief and feelings of loss enough to fill a tub, you know that celebrations this year are terribly difficult. So we ask, Holy God of Advent, that during this season you will come again, anew and refresh our spirits that may feel wounded or even broken. Help us to do our best within the world we live in today to keep awake not only to ways we can help others but to allow you space to fill our hearts and bring us your peace. Amen